

## Article

# Advanced Contemplation of the Impure: Reflections on a Capstone Event in the *Meditation Sutra*

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**Abstract:** The present article explores the form of meditation called contemplation of the impure (Skt *aśubha-bhāvanā*; Ch. *bújīng guān* 不淨觀) and its meticulous description in a Chinese text produced in the early fifth century CE. It illustrates the problematic nature of the pure-impure polarity and suggests that, ultimately, “purity” refers to two different things. As a generic category, it can be understood as a mental construct resulting from the mind’s discursive functioning, which tends to be further complicated by cultural factors. The other avenue for interpreting “purity” is provided in this meditation manual, which describes how meditation on impurity leads to the direct perception of purity, and to the vision of a “pure land.” This stage is identified as a “sign” marking the completion of this contemplative practice. Examining the specific nature of this capstone event and some of its implications lies at the core of the research whose initial results are presented here. Although this particular Buddhist contemplation of the impure begins with mental images of decaying corpses, it culminates with the manifestation of a vision filling the practitioner with a sense of light and purity. This high point indicates when the practice has been successful, an event that coincides for practitioners with a time when they catch a glimpse of their true nature. The last section of this article further discusses the extent to which positing an intrinsically pure nature—one of the major innovations introduced by Buddhism in fifth-century China—could inform ethical views.

**Keywords:** contemplation of the impure; *aśubhā-bhāvanā bújīng guān* 不淨觀; pure-impure dichotomy; *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*; Six Dynasties Liù Cháo 六朝; *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra Rúláizàng jīng* 如來藏經; Buddhahadra Fótuóbátuólúó 佛陀跋陀羅; *Meditation Sutra of Dharmatrāta Dámóduōluó chánjīng* 達摩多羅禪經; Émile Durkheim; Mary Douglas

## 1. Introduction

Religious Studies contribute to complicating the concept of “purity,” mostly by examining its construction across multiple traditions and by scrutinizing its social dimension. While the anthropological approach to how purity and impurity are or were perceived on the ground provides invaluable insights, such discussions focusing on the wide range of prohibitions and observances formulated in various societies tend to neglect the philosophical implications of the pure/impure dichotomy. Although early studies conducted by Émile Durkheim and Mary Douglas highlighted the fact that purity and impurity are saturated with ambiguity—to the extent that they often morph into one another—they focused on cultural areas and contexts far away from the Asian context discussed here. Thus, the first multifaceted research question that needs to be addressed is whether their approaches could prove relevant to other contexts, or at least help to contextualize practices pertaining to different geographical areas and different time periods. Furthermore, it proves legitimate to ask whether establishing a link between the ancient Buddhist contemplation of the impure and these scholars’ discoveries can yield any new insight, or whether it constitutes too much of a stretch.

This article’s first objective is to introduce a relatively neglected Chinese text produced in the early fifth century CE, the *Meditation Sutra* (*Dámóduōluó chánjīng* 達摩多羅禪經, literally the

“Meditation Sutra of Dharmatrāta,” hereafter abbreviated as MS). This relatively ancient<sup>1</sup> primary source meticulously describes the form of meditation called the contemplation of the impure (*bújīng guān* 不淨觀; Skt *aśubha-bhāvanā*) and posits a progression that leads practitioners from an initial focus on impurity to the advanced stage where they perceive a “sign” marking the completion of this contemplative practice. Although this text seems to have been produced by teachers with a background in one of the branches of the Sarvāstivāda school of Buddhism, no Sanskrit original has ever been discovered, and its structure and content suggest that it was compiled as a collection of notes akin to a meditation manual.

Accordingly, this study’s scope is largely confined to the cosmopolitan context of Buddhism during the Six Dynasties (Liù Cháo 六朝, 220–589 CE), in which large groups of monastics were invited to come from areas corresponding to present-day India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Central Asia. Focusing on this particular phase of religious and intellectual history, this article emphasizes developments prior and after the emergence of the MS, paying particular attention to issues of intertextuality. Intertextual occurrences also suggest broader philosophical questions about the implications of the pure/impure dichotomy, especially the way it was reframed in Buddhist scriptures. Occasional references to the field of Religious Studies—particularly to the work of Durkheim and Douglas—aim at exploring whether it might be legitimate to identify wider affinities among approaches concluding that purity and impurity constitute two sides of the same coin. Yet these punctual convergences will only be mentioned in passing and do not constitute the central thread of this article.

The line of enquiry followed here draws from the philological method, informed by concerns and questions pertaining to religious and intellectual history. Navigating between these two poles requires us to carefully differentiate between what the text says, its immediate implications, and the broader associations that it may indicate. While this article endeavors to draw clear demarcation lines between these three categories of meaning (plain, implied, and associated), it also scrutinizes each of them without complacency and occasionally ventures into suggesting links between them.

Although focusing on one particular textual instance cannot do justice to the larger contemporary cluster of similar scriptures emphasizing meditation,<sup>2</sup> the significance of the MS for understanding the contemplation of the impure has hitherto been overlooked. It shows one facet of how this type of contemplation was envisioned during that particular phase of Buddhism in China, combining the traditional exegetical approach of the Sarvāstivāda school with echoes of visions that evoke mystical or experiential techniques. Comparing it with the similar text produced by Kumārajīva and his translation team—now available in English as *The Sutra on the Concentration of Sitting Meditation* (2009, hereafter SCSM)—reveals remarkable differences between these two contemporary interpretations of how the contemplation of the impure ought to be conducted and what results can be expected from this practice.<sup>3</sup>

The most salient differences between the two texts result first from the sheer amount of space dedicated to the contemplation of the impure in the MS. Both texts also diverge in the way they describe the physical body, which is mostly described in the SCSM using the common metaphor of “a leather bag full of feces”.<sup>4</sup> Whereas the SCSM devotes only limited attention to the contemplation of the impure, this topic constitutes one of the key features of the MS, to the extent that it is even called “the Sutra on the Contemplation of the Impure” (*Bújīngguān jīng* 不淨觀經) in a catalogue compiled

<sup>1</sup> Buddhism was introduced into areas corresponding to modern day China around the first century of the Common Era, with Zürcher providing the date 65 CE for “the first unquestionable sign of Buddhism in China.” (Zürcher 1991, p. 282).

<sup>2</sup> In the Chinese cultural sphere, so-called “meditation sutras” became increasingly popular around the fifth century. A wide sample of this type of literature is included in volume 15 of the Taishō edition of the Buddhist Canon. See also the excellent dissertation by Greene (2012).

<sup>3</sup> The *Zuòchán sānmèi jīng* 坐禪三昧經 (Sutra on the Concentration of Seated Meditation), T. 15 no. 614, translated by Yamabe and Sueki (2009).

<sup>4</sup> T. 15 no. 614, 281c05, (Yamabe and Sueki 2009).

around 515 by Sēngyòu 僧祐 (445–518).<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the SCSM merely considers this practice as one of the four “antidotes” to various defilements, the one that is particularly efficacious for the eradication of lust. Its first fascicle discusses “The Method of Cutting Lust,” which briefly mentions the visualization of the nine phases of the decomposition of a corpse.<sup>6</sup> In its second fascicle, the SCSM returns to the “Meditation on the Impurities,” listed as the remedy to cure lust and, without providing further guidance on how to pursue this meditation technique, asserts:

If one considers [the body] as pure even a little, one’s mind develops attachment. If one mostly thinks of the impurity [of the body], one’s mind develops aversion. Because one goes beyond the characteristics of elements, the true Dharma emerges. In the reality of ‘all’ elements, there is no purity or impurity, nor is there enclosure or exit.<sup>7</sup>

This suggests that, even though the MS and the SCSM were completed just a few years apart and their respective compilers shared partially similar sectarian backgrounds (both studied the Sarvāstivāda tradition), they converge and diverge regarding the specifics. They agree on the ultimate need to overcome the pure/impure dichotomy, a point called the “real character of all dharmas” or “the reality of ‘all’ elements” in the above-mentioned translation of the SCSM (*zhūfǎ shíxiàng* 諸法實相).<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, the MS is the only text providing extensive details on how the progression from the impure to the pure unfolds. Further details will be discussed below, but this preliminary sketch points out the significance and uniqueness of the MS, which entirely dedicates four of its seventeen sections to the contemplation of the impure. Subsequently, this source constitutes a major resource for understanding this form of practice and the importance it had acquired by the fifth century CE.

Regarding the philological approach used in analyzing this text, its application to comparative research develops in two directions. First, it develops in a horizontal or synchronous direction by examining internal evidence and contemporary sources, then it expands into a diachronic or vertical direction by looking at earlier or later documents. Given the relatively obscure production of the MS, it proves necessary to elucidate its meaning in reference to other texts attributed to the same author/translator and to envision its relation to similar scriptures. What captures our attention is that the MS was composed during one of the most seminal periods of Chinese religious history (the Six Dynasties), during which various interpretations of the Buddhist doctrine and of other religious traditions were competing for patrons. Its emphasis on meditation precludes the unification of imperial China under the Sui Dynasty (581–618), and provides a glimpse of what is described below as “Chan Before Chan,” namely a tradition putting the emphasis on meditation before this form of practice became the hallmark of the monastic community claiming Bodhidharma as its founder.

The central argument developed in this article is that the MS articulates a novel approach to the contemplation of the impure, which radically departs from its previous iterations. It specifically encourages practitioners to proceed from the contemplation of impure substances (rotting corpses) to a direct experiential perception of purity, which then develop into blissful visions of a pure land. The characterization of this meditation practice’s apex as a “capstone event” serves to illustrate how this curriculum unfolds as a process, whose mastery can be authenticated by a teacher having successfully followed the same trajectory.

## 2. Different Strains of Purity and Attempts to Look Beyond the Sectarian Horizon

Reflecting on the various forms of Buddhist contemplation of the impure suggests that, ultimately, “purity” as envisioned through the lenses of the pure/impure polarity can refer to at least two different things. As a generic category, it can be understood as a mental construct resulting from the mind’s

<sup>5</sup> In the *Chūsānzàng jījī* 出三藏記集 (Catalog of Works Included in the Tripiṭaka) T. 55 no. 2145, 11c14.

<sup>6</sup> T. 15 no. 614, 271c12, (Yamabe and Sueki 2009, p. 11).

<sup>7</sup> T. 15 no. 614, 281c27–281c29, (Yamabe and Sueki 2009, p. 66).

<sup>8</sup> T. 15 no. 614, 282a01, (Yamabe and Sueki 2009, p. 66).

discursive functioning, which tends to be further complicated by sociohistorical and linguistic factors. The other avenue is provided in this meditation manual, which describes how meditation on impurity leads to the direct perception of purity, a stage identified as the “sign” marking the completion of this contemplative practice. Although the Buddhist contemplation of the impure begins with mental images of decaying corpses, the version presented in the MS culminates with the manifestation of a vision filling the practitioner with a sense of light and purity. This high point indicates when the practice has been successfully accomplished, and coincides with a time when practitioners catch a glimpse of their true nature. The last section of this article further discusses the extent to which traditions positing an intrinsically pure nature—one of the major innovations introduced by Buddhist sources in fifth-century China—could inform ethical views in the twenty-first century.

As we attempt to contextualize the various ideas revolving around purity and impurity in ancient sources pertaining to the vast transcultural arena subsumed under the heading of Indian and Chinese Buddhism, it appears necessary to anticipate a potential objection to this endeavor. Scholars focusing on textual traditions belonging to specific sectarian approaches—such as the Sarvāstivāda tradition closely linked to the text discussed here—may be skeptical about attempts to broaden the conversation by including ideas conveyed by different Buddhist monastic communities. For instance, although the *Teachings of Vimalakīrti* and the ideas about nonduality<sup>9</sup> discussed hereafter may reflect a strand of the Buddhist tradition brought to China that is distinct from the MS, it nevertheless constituted a significant part of the religious and intellectual landscape of the early fifth century CE.

Furthermore, Buddhahadra’s work in translating the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra* and other scriptures provides strong evidence that this teacher showed interest and was involved in a broad number of traditions beyond his own. A possible objection to this would be to say that translation activities constitute a different category, which does not necessarily imply acceptance of these texts’ content. This may be the case, but at least it demonstrates familiarity with sources beyond a particular individual’s sectarian affiliation. Additionally, for us to understand the major transformations affecting Buddhism during the Six Dynasties, the first priority should be to examine contemporary trends and the intertwinement between political and religious history rather than exclusively acquiring fragmented glimpses of that time period through sectarian lenses. Throughout this journey discussing the MS and some of its implications, I suggest that we begin by looking at the broad picture, before zooming in onto specific passages of the text and, at the end, conclude by returning to a wider vista, including issues relevant to our contemporary context.

### 3. Comparative Premises

There are two disclaimers that need to be emphasized before we proceed. First, in English and in most languages, “purity” can refer to both physical and mental contexts. Although the metaphorical dimension tends to come to the fore, it is also sometimes understood literally, for instance when certain taboos, such as the need to abstain from particular foods, are enforced. This is where sociologists have contributed to revealing the hidden structures underlying practices that served other purposes, for instance to maintain the group’s cohesion or harmony.

The second disclaimer relates to this term’s nuances in English, which often suggest connotations coming from the Abrahamic traditions. This is especially true in some Puritan Protestant denominations, where it became associated with chastity. We also need to refrain from projecting categories inherited from Western philosophy. For example, Kant wrote his *Critique of Pure Reason* (*Kritik der reinen Vernunft*; 1781; second edition 1787) for the purpose of analyzing whether reason can exist independently from experience. He was mostly concerned with metaphysics, in an attempt to dismiss earlier works on empiricism. In any case, this article focuses on the religious connotations attached to purity—which

<sup>9</sup> See in particular chapter 9, which is entirely focused on articulating the nondual approach (*Bù'èr fǎmén pǐn* 不二法門品). The Chinese version whose translation is attributed to Kumārajīva and his team also appeared in the early fifth century CE.

raise completely different issues—but it nonetheless appears necessary to exclude elements unrelated to the practices presented here.

### 3.1. Early Western Scholarship Discussing People without History

Among Religious Studies pioneers, Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) played a significant role in linking religious phenomena and practices to their social background. In *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912, reprinted as [Durkheim 1991](#), translated into English in 1915), he discussed observances among the Narrinyeri (aka Ngarrindjeri) people of Southern Australia. In relation to the umbilical cord, for example, they believed it to conceal a part of the infant's soul, and preserved it as a powerful object. Regarding the ambiguity of this object, Durkheim observed that, “Two persons who exchange the cords thus preserved communicate together by the very act of this exchange, for it is as though they exchanged their souls. But, at the same time, they are forbidden to touch or speak to or even to see one another” ([Durkheim 1915](#)). Further elaborating on the ambiguity resulting from sacrifices, Durkheim concludes that:

The victim immolated in expiatory sacrifices is charged with impurities, for they have concentrated upon it the sins which were to be expiated. Yet, after it has been slaughtered, its flesh and blood are employed for the most pious uses. [ ... ] So the **pure and the impure** are not two separate classes, but two varieties of the same class, which includes all sacred things. There are two sorts of sacredness, the **propitious and the unpropitious** [ ... ]. ([Durkheim 1915](#), emphasis added)

Although Durkheim did not have opportunities to conduct fieldwork at that time, it is remarkable that he succeeded in discovering the extent to which purity and impurity represent two sides of the same coin. As a good sociologist, he was inclined to rephrase this by speaking of the propitious—in other words, what proves favorable. Today, Religious Studies scholars prefer to speak of “efficacy”. In any case, Durkheim provides a hint that so-called “purity” needs to be problematized and examined from a much broader perspective than just the physical or visible dimension.

### 3.2. Mary Douglas and Her Innovative Take

Mary Douglas (1921–2007) took this idea one step further in her *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (1966). After having conducted fieldwork in the Belgian Congo during the early stages of her career, she expanded her research to include dietary rules found in the Old Testament.<sup>10</sup> In her initial analysis mentioning the ancient Hebrew context, she provides several insights that matter for our inquiry. First, she determines that, from a sociological perspective, pollution or prohibition against certain foods results from the perception that these items constitute an “anomaly”. She claims:

If the proposed interpretation of the forbidden animals is correct, the dietary laws would have been like signs which at every turn inspired meditation on the oneness, purity and completeness of God. ([Douglas 2001](#), p. 58)

In a humorous twist, Douglas suggests the following:

If penguins lived in the Near East I would expect them to be ruled unclean as wingless birds. If the list of unclean birds could be retranslated from this point of view, it might well turn out that they are anomalous because they swim and dive as well as they fly, or in some other way they are not fully bird-like. ([Douglas 2001](#), p. 57)

<sup>10</sup> Chapter 3, titled “The Abominations of Leviticus”, provides a detailed analysis of passages in Leviticus and Deuteronomy, which later led her to publish a monograph on the topic: [Douglas \(1999\)](#). *Leviticus as Literature*.

In other words, a phenomenon's unusual or anomalous character triggers its labeling as "unclean" or "impure", reflecting some conscious or unconscious attempt to exclude categories considered as antagonistic to the idea of the divine. Douglas proceeds by creating a strong personal metaphor, which resonates with Asian approaches to this question in emphasizing the mentally created nature of "defilement" (although she probably meant it in the literal sense, not in the Buddhist sense):

So long as identity is absent, rubbish is not dangerous. [ . . . ] Even the bones of buried kings rouse little awe and the thought that the air is full of the dust of corpses of bygone races has no power to move. Where there is no differentiation there is no defilement. (Douglas 2001, p. 161)

Before leaping into another context and determining whether both the Asian and non-Asian worlds intersect in this regard, let us recap some of the considerations examined so far.

First, there is a need to broaden the purity versus impurity paradigm and to question its underlying assumptions. This also implies avoiding superficial links with the Puritan nuances of the term and those associated with Western philosophy. Among pioneering research focusing on purity, the work of Émile Durkheim contributed to emphasize this concept's ambiguity, and it received further attention from Mary Douglas, who characterized pollution as an "anomaly". Both authors indicated the need to go beyond the superficial contrast based on the binary opposition between the pure and the impure, suggesting that these concepts either derived from mechanisms related to their degree of social efficacy or from the need to exclude heterogeneous categories whose oddity contradicted the image of perfection associated with the divine.

#### 4. Purity and Purification in the Indic Context

As we delve into the specific Buddhist meditation practice focused on impurity, it may prove useful to briefly describe the semantic range of related Sanskrit terms. This outline relies on the work of Patrick Olivelle, who greatly contributed to our understanding of relevant sources. He suggested that three overlapping categories stand out among words conveying the idea of "purity":

- *śuci*, *aśuci*, and *śauca*, which often refer to cleanliness of the body or of one's environment but can also mean honesty and dishonesty.
- *śuddhi*, *śuddha*, and *viśuddhi*—all convey a similar nuance related to purity, albeit with more emphasis on purification. To those familiar with Buddhist sources, the Pāli equivalent *visuddhi* evokes the masterpiece of the Theravāda scholar Buddhaghosa, *Visuddhimagga*, translated as *The Path of Purification*.<sup>11</sup>
- *śubha* and *aśubha* tend to deal with the flow of time and life, with *śubha* indicating something that redirects this flow in fertile and prosperous directions. It is also translated as auspiciousness.<sup>12</sup> The Buddhist interpretation of *aśubha* gave a different twist to this term, with the Chinese translation emphasizing the "impure" nuances and sometimes evoking something "horrible" or "repulsive," often rendered as "foulness".<sup>13</sup>

Thus, although translations vary depending on the context, the above three broad categories give us a first idea of the range and complexity of these terms and ideas in Sanskrit. In his analysis based on Dharma Literature (*Dharmaśāstra*), Olivelle emphasizes that rules revolving around impurity served as a system of socialization deeply linked to the caste system:

The socialising aspect of these rules also explains another aspect of purity/impurity: the ultimate aim of these rules is not to make people remain constantly pure, which is in principle impossible. Their aim, I believe, is to make people intent on *recovering purity*.

<sup>11</sup> Buddhaghosa and Nanamoli (1999).

<sup>12</sup> Olivelle (1998, p. 214). See also Madan (1991).

<sup>13</sup> See Mohr (2009).



Hence most of the terms used for purity, especially *śuddhi* and *śuci*, as we have seen, mean not *being pure* but the act of *becoming pure*. It is purification not purity that is at the heart of the system. (Olivelle 1998, p. 214. Emphasis in the original article.)

Now, as we move to the discussion focused on a supposedly Indian Buddhist source and its transmission into the Sinosphere, this new context can serve as a litmus test for the aforementioned perspective that the concept of religious “impurity” often results from the perception of certain phenomena as an “anomaly”. In her recent article, Amy Paris Langenberg proposed to apply “Douglas’s theories of pollution to the Indian Buddhist example” in order to test the validity of her theories. She argues that it “contains within itself sufficient complexity to provide a good testing ground for her theory’s explanatory power in cases of internal contradiction and segmentation” (Paris Langenberg 2016, p. 158).

Paris Langenberg examines three social environments: Brahman legal texts, in which the impurity of women is viewed ambivalently; Buddhist Vinaya texts, where nuns were separated from elite males in a parallel and legally subordinate subinstitution; and Mahāyāna sūtras depicting the abomination of the female body.<sup>14</sup> After having reviewed this extended body of literature, Paris Langenberg concludes that, “Douglas’s early theory stands up, however, to the complexity of classical Indian Buddhism” (Paris Langenberg 2016, p. 183).

The above meticulous research conducted by Paris Langenberg suggests an affirmative reply to the question raised at the beginning of this article about whether the approaches of Durkheim and Douglas could prove relevant to other contexts. They certainly allow us to envision purity-related practices from a broader perspective, which does not imply the need for any oversimplification. Now, having clarified the main linguistic connotations of “purity” in the Indic context, we need to consider some of its premodern philosophical implications according to Buddhist scriptures.

## 5. Some Philosophical Implications

The huge corpus of Buddhist sources includes a wide range of approaches to the notion of “purity”. Yet, especially in Mahāyāna scriptures, this concept is usually envisioned from a perspective defined as “nondualistic”. Let us examine two examples.

### 5.1. In the Teachings of Vimalakīrti

Chapter 3 of the *Teachings of Vimalakīrti* includes a passage of particular relevance to us which unfolds as a dialogue between Upāli (considered as *the* expert in monastic discipline or Vinaya) and the layman Vimalakīrti. The following English translations of the words uttered by Vimalakīrti are based, respectively, on the Tibetan version (Thurman 1990), which is closer to Sanskrit, and on Kumārajīva’s Chinese version (Watson 1999).

#### (1. Thurman)

Reverend Upāli, passions consist of conceptualizations.

The ultimate nonexistence of these conceptualizations and imaginary fabrications—that is the purity that is the **intrinsic nature** of the mind. (Thurman 31, emphasis added)

#### (2. Watson)

Ah, Upali, deluded thoughts are defilement.

Where there are no deluded thoughts, that is purity. (Watson 47)

<sup>14</sup> For this, see Wilson (1996).

I highlighted the word corresponding to the Sanskrit *prakṛti*, rendered in Thurman's translation as "intrinsic nature," because Kumārajīva's translation into Chinese disregards this word and gives a slightly different connotation to the whole sentence.<sup>15</sup>

What catches our attention in this passage is that it establishes a link between purity and the intrinsic nature (also called the Buddha-nature in other texts). It posits that purity can neither be acquired nor result from some form of cultivation: it is inborn, albeit concealed by delusory factors including defilements (translated by Thurman as passions).

The following passage is even more radically summarized in Chinese by Kumārajīva and his translation team. Here are the two renderings of this passage:

(1. Thurman)

Misapprehensions are passions. The ultimate absence of misapprehensions is the intrinsic nature of the mind. (Thurman 31)<sup>16</sup>

(2. Watson)

Topsy-turvy thinking is defilement. Where there is no topsy-turvy thinking, that is purity. (Watson 47)

Although the topic of purity and the way it was reframed in the Chinese translations of the *Teachings of Vimalakīrti* would in itself constitute a topic worth dedicating an entire article to, let me summarize what these two excerpts suggest. They show how, typically, the Chinese text translated by Kumārajīva and his team took a life of its own. Yet, like in the case of other scriptures, this version became the most widely read one. Therefore, regardless of the degree of its accuracy, this version is the one that matters the most in terms of religious and intellectual history, because it likely contributed to a larger extent to shaping the understanding of the concept of purity. If we recap by looking closely at the two main Chinese translations of the above by including the one by Xuánzàng 玄奘 (602–664), they distinguish between two asymmetric dimensions:

- The limiting factors, which are characterized as "impure";<sup>17</sup>
- The inherently free nature, characterized as "pure".<sup>18</sup>

Only Xuanzang translates the Sanskrit *prakṛti* for "nature" as *xìng* 性, and he adds the adjective for "pure" (*qīngjìng* 清淨) to make it a compound, which was later used in texts produced by the Yogācāra school.

At any rate, what matters is that in this sutra, and especially in its Chinese translations, the interpretation of purity and impurity posits a distinction between the absence or presence of cognitive distortions, which Watson renders as "topsy-turvy thinking" (*diāndǎo* 顛倒).<sup>19</sup> The Sanskrit

<sup>15</sup> Here is how it appears in Kumārajīva's translation: 唯優波離妄想是垢 無妄想是淨 *Wéi Yōubólí wàngxiǎng shì gòu, wú wàngxiǎng shì jìng* (T 475, 541b23–24).

Sanskrit experts will immediately spot the gap with the Sanskrit text, which has:

§35 *saṃkalpo bhadantopāle kleśaḥ | akalpāvikalpā ca prakṛtiḥ* | (emphasis added).

<sup>16</sup> Here is the Chinese version coined by Kumārajīva and his translation team:

顛倒是垢。無顛倒是淨 *diāndǎo shì gòu, wú diāndǎo shì jìng* (T 475, 541b24).

This passage supposedly corresponds to:

*viparyāsaḥ saṃkleśaḥ, aviparyastā ca prakṛtiḥ* (MS 18a2).

<sup>17</sup> The Sanskrit text has: *saṃkalpo kleśa* or *viparyāsa saṃkleśa* (defilements/afflictions/pollutions).

Its two main translations, by Kumārajīva (abbreviated as ㊟) and by Xuánzàng 玄奘 (abbreviated as ㊟), are listed below. The earliest one by Zhī Qiān 支謙 can be neglected.

㊟ *wàngxiǎng* 妄想 ㊟ *yǒu fēnbíe yǒuyì fēnbíe* 有分別有異分別—> ㊟ *gòu* 垢 ㊟ *fánnǎo* 煩惱.

㊟ *diāndǎo* 顛倒 ㊟ *ruò yǒu diāndǎo jí yǒu fánnǎo* 若有顛倒即有煩惱—> ㊟ *gòu* 垢 ㊟ *fánnǎo* 煩惱.

To render the compound *wàngxiǎng* 妄想, I would prefer "delusive conceptualization," and for *diāndǎo* 顛倒, it seems that "cognitive distortion" provides a good approximation.

<sup>18</sup> The Sanskrit text has: *aviparyastā ca prakṛti* —> ㊟ *jìng* 淨 ㊟ *xìng qīngjìng* 性清淨 (the purity of the intrinsic nature).

<sup>19</sup> This implies asymmetry, in the sense that the Buddha-nature does not need to be purified and cannot be acquired.



text, however, does not explicitly refer to purity, although it discusses “the absence of cognitive distortion” (*aviparyastā*). As far as the *Teachings of Vimalakīrti* are concerned, we might be tempted to see “purity” as a chief concern of the Chinese translators.

This brief discussion of the *Teachings of Vimalakīrti* neither implies that Buddhahadra necessarily read this source, nor that his own approach informed by the Sarvāstivāda understanding of the Abhidharma was compatible with the more radical views expressed in this scripture. The reason that warrants mentioning this source is that, during the same period, Buddhahadra’s translation team and Kumārajīva’s were competing to render new texts into Chinese, and that Chinese literati and Buddhist scholars at that time were therefore susceptible to being exposed to a whole range of theories about what “purity” meant and how it was interpreted. We find, however, compelling evidence demonstrating that Buddhahadra was familiar with Buddhist literature emphasizing the centrality of the intrinsic Buddha-nature. The best example is the translation of the *Sutra of the Tathāgata’s Womb* attributed to him, which is mentioned in the next paragraph. It includes the following passage put into the Buddha’s mouth:

In the same way I [can] see that also all sentient beings have for a long time been constantly overpowered by defilements, [but] knowing that their defilements [are only] accidental (*āgantuka*), [I] teach the Dharma with [appropriate] means in order to purify [their] intrinsic nature (*prakṛti*).<sup>20</sup>

## 5.2. In the Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra

This brings us to the *Sutra of the Tathāgata’s Womb* (*Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra*; Ch. *Rúláizàng jīng* 如來藏經, T 16 no. 666), whose first translation into Chinese is attributed to Buddhahadra (Fótuóbátuóluó 佛陀跋陀羅, 359–429 CE), the author or compiler of the MS discussed in this article.<sup>21</sup> This source displays a vast array of metaphors, all emphasizing how the pure is concealed within the impure.

Among these various metaphors, the “gold nugget in excrement” provides an example of how physical impurity serves to highlight mental factors and intrinsic perfection: “It is like the example of real gold that fell into an impure (or filthy) place . . .”,<sup>22</sup> followed by the explanation of this term’s meaning: “In [this simile], sons of good family, [what] is called ‘all sorts of decaying substances and filth’ is a designation for the different kinds of defilements”.<sup>23</sup> The Chinese text is simpler: “the impure place indicates the boundless afflictions”.<sup>24</sup> Even this short passage suggests an understanding similar to that of the *Teachings of Vimalakīrti*, placing the purity/impurity divide into the mental sphere and using a shocking analogy to make the point that both ends of the spectrum belong to the same self-constructed realm. This leads us to scrutinize the text that lies at the core of this article, asking whether its interpretative framework is identical. Let us first briefly describe the nature of this text and its whereabouts.

## 6. Why the Meditation Sutra?

Although the *Meditation Sutra of Dharmatrāta* (MS) is categorized as a “sutra” included in the Buddhist Canon (T 15 no. 618), it would be more accurate to describe it as a meditation manual. It constitutes one of several similar texts produced around the same time period which even constitute a specific “genre” of Buddhist literature, the so-called Dhyāna sūtras or scriptures focused on

<sup>20</sup> Zimmerman 119.

<sup>21</sup> Radich’s study discussed the hypothesis that portions of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-mahāsūtra* could provide one of the earliest examples of a Tathāgatagarbha text. See Radich (2015).

<sup>22</sup> Emphasizing the central metaphor of “pure gold” (*pīrú zhēnjīn duò bújīng chù* 譬如真金墮不淨處) T 16, no. 666, 458a24, Zimmerman 117.

<sup>23</sup> Zimmerman 117. T 16, no. 666, 458a27–28.

<sup>24</sup> T 16, no. 666, 458a27. It is remarkable that several of these Buddhist texts included an internal way to define their terminology and its main implications (*bújīng chù zhě wúliàng fánnǎo shì* 不淨處者無量煩惱是; T 666 458a24; Zimmerman 117). See also Grosnick (1995) and Radich (2015).

meditative concentration.<sup>25</sup> Studies by Chen (2014), Deleanu (1992, 2006), Greene (2012, 2014, 2016), and Radich (2019) all contribute to expand our understanding of the transformations that accompanied this new fervor for meditative practices.

In terms of the oldest copies of this text available today, the National Digital Library of China possesses a copy of the Song edition that was originally part of the Sixi Canon (*Sìxīzàng* 思溪藏) kept at Zifu Chan Temple (Húzhōu Sīxī Fǎbǎo Zífú Chánsì 湖州思溪法寶資福禪寺) in present Zhejiang Province.<sup>26</sup> Yet, this copy was incomplete and its final compilation incorporates missing pieces borrowed from Japanese sources. Furthermore, it does neither include an indication of the date when it was carved, nor the traditional colophon information customary in ancient sources.

Aside from this somehow questionable version going back to the Northern Song (960–1127), the most complete edition is kept at Beijing’s National Library and was printed during the Yongle era (Yǒnglè 永樂 10–15, corresponding to 1412–17), before being reprinted (*chóngyìn* 重印) in the Jiajing era (Jiājīng 嘉靖 30, namely 1551).<sup>27</sup> Thus, it appears safe to assume that the most reliable existing edition is the one produced in the fifteenth century, during the Ming Dynasty. A comparison of the various editions shows no significant differences between the Ming edition and the so-called Song edition, but the Japanese edition included in the Taishō Canon is full of mistakes, although footnotes indicate the main variants.

The practical reasons that drew my interest in this particular piece are twofold. First, this text has been greatly neglected, partially because of its unclear background.<sup>28</sup> Everything seems to suggest that it was not translated from a Prakrit or Sanskrit original, and many unanswered questions remain regarding its title and its possible sources, not to mention its author. For the sake of clarity, I simply assume that its so-called “translator”, Buddhahadra—who is the only individual identified in the body of the text—represents the most significant contributor to this source’s production. Regarding the Chinese text that resulted from Buddhahadra’s contribution (presumably with considerable help from Chinese literati), it is written in an extremely concise and cryptic style, which makes it difficult to decipher, let alone translate into readable English.

### 6.1. Need to Analyze Chan before Chan

The second reason results from both the feeling of a scholarly responsibility, and from my personal background as someone who studied Chan and Zen literature. It may remain invisible to modern speakers of Mandarin Chinese, but *chán* 禪 means two different things depending on the context, a factor contributing to the ambiguity of the term. Before the Chan tradition coalesced as an organized community around the seventh century, it simply indicated “meditation” (Pāli *jhāna*, Skt *dhyāna*), whereas, later on, it acquired a whole range of exclusive meanings that the Chan masters claimed as unique to their tradition. This is why I consider that focusing on Chan (meaning here “meditation”) before the emergence of the organized Chan school is crucial, because it allows us to bracket the later sectarian interpretations.<sup>29</sup> Fortunately, this line of research is receiving increasing attention, including Michael Radich’s recent study of the cave carved by Sengchou 僧稠 (480–560) (Radich 2019).

Several years ago, while conducting research on the Japanese Rinzai teacher Tōrei Enji 東嶺圓慈 (1721–92),<sup>30</sup> I came across his extensive commentary of the MS, titled *Darumatara zenkyō settsū*

<sup>25</sup> Several of them are included in volume 15 of the Taishō edition of the Buddhist Canon. As mentioned above, one of sources the most closely related to the MS is the *Sutra on the Concentration of Sitting Meditation* (*Zuòchán sānmèi jīng* 坐禪三昧經, T 15 no. 614, abbreviated as SCSM), translated by Yamabe and Sueki (2009).

<sup>26</sup> The two fascicles of this text correspond to SX4575 and SX4577 in the huge corpus of 4647 volumes (*cè* 册) digitized for this project, identified as Rare Book 3129 (*shànběn shūhào* 善本书号 03129).

<sup>27</sup> See the text digitized by the National Digital Library of China (Zhōngguó guójiā shùzì túshūguǎn 中国国家数字图书馆), <http://opac.nlc.cn>, with the following ID number, 312002082295, or reference number (*shūhào* 书号) 141380: 榮297 (7–8).

<sup>28</sup> The question of authorship is discussed in Mohr (2006).

<sup>29</sup> McRae (1986, 2003) was one of the early scholars expressing interest in the issues at stake (1986), and later summarized his insights in an accessible format (2003).

<sup>30</sup> Mohr (1997).

*kōsho* 達磨多羅禪經說通考疏. This text was published in 1784, and there are two remaining woodblock editions but no modern printed version.<sup>31</sup> In spite of the author's occasional tendency to project a "Zen" interpretation onto the MS, he provided the only systematic treatment of this text in its entirety. The problem with the MS is that although many scholars mention this text in a cursory manner, nobody takes the time to decipher its abstruse content.

## 6.2. Regarding This Text's Compiler

The compiler or author of the *Meditation Sutra*, Buddhahadra, was active in Chang'an 長安, Lushan 廬山, and Jiankang 建康 (present-day Nanjing) at the beginning of the fifth century. Although the issues revolving around his biography, especially his supposed Nepalese origins and his background as a Sārvāstivādin, go beyond the scope of this article, it appears necessary to mention here that some accounts of his presence in Southern China have been distorted. One particularly misleading instance—which I am increasingly inclined to consider a deliberate falsification of history—is the claim about his presence in Yangzhou, in the present Suzhou Province. I am still in the process of identifying the culprits, but literati appointed by Emperor Qianlong (Qiánlóng 乾隆, 1711–1799) in the late eighteenth century can be considered as the top suspects. More about this will follow in my forthcoming publications about the MS.

## 6.3. Alternative Titles

One of the most fascinating sections of the MS is its preface attributed to Lúshān Huìyuǎn 廬山慧遠 (334–416), in which he displays his own complex background as a former Daoist practitioner. Specifically, this preface indicates Huiyuan's affinities with the Xuánxué 玄學 (Mysterious Learning) school of Neo-Daoism. Although there are legitimate questions about whether Huiyuan's preface belongs to this text, and about the reasons why Huiyuan did not mention Buddhahadra, the early connection between the MS and this preface is certified by Sēngyòu in his catalogue, thus providing a solid indication (see below). One of the factors likely to have urged Huiyuan's cautious attitude toward Buddhahadra is the decision Huiyuan had made to welcome Buddhahadra at his Donglin monastery 東林寺 on Mount Lu in 410, after Buddhahadra had been expelled from Chang'an following a rift with Kumārajīva's followers. Huiyuan, who also enjoyed a cordial correspondence with Kumārajīva, likely chose to avoid mentioning Buddhahadra, whose position there could have constituted a sensitive topic.<sup>32</sup> Regarding the authorship of the MS, Huiyuan wrote, obviously omitting its translator or compiler: "[The text] that has just been translated comes from Dharmatrāta (Dámódūōluó 達摩多羅) and Buddhasena (Fódàxiān 佛大先)".<sup>33</sup>

We get helpful hints about Huiyuan's understanding of the MS's content in the way he understood its title. Huiyuan's preface ends with, "Yogācārabhūmi (Yǔjiā zhēluó fú mí 庾伽遮羅浮迷), translated as (yì yán 譯言) "Stages on the Path of Cultivation" (Xiūxíng dào dì 修行道地)".<sup>34</sup> Sēngyòu in his *Catalog* mentions two additional titles: *Chánjīng xiūxíng fāngbiàn* 禪經修行方便 (The Meditation Sutra's Preliminary Practices)<sup>35</sup> and *Bújīngguān jīng* 不淨觀經 (The Sutra on the Contemplation of the Impure).<sup>36</sup> These four different titles indicate that this was a manual focused on practice, and that the name Dharmatrāta attached to it may simply have been a device designed to distinguish this manual from similar texts, a sort of dedication to this eminent Sarvāstivāda teacher.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>31</sup> A digitized PDF version of this huge text is now available: <http://evols.library.manoa.hawaii.edu/handle/10524/47071>.

<sup>32</sup> See Robinson (1967) about the relation between Huiyuan and Kumārajīva, the dissertation by Guo (2007), and Lu (2004).

<sup>33</sup> T 15 no. 618, 301b09.

<sup>34</sup> T 15 no. 618, 301b22.

<sup>35</sup> More below about the way we ought to understand the term *fāngbiàn* 方便 in this context.

<sup>36</sup> T55 no. 2145, 11c14.

<sup>37</sup> The *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* includes a passage mentioning the Venerable Dharmatrāta (Skt *bhadantadharmatrāto*; Fǎjiù 法救 in Xuanzang's translation), identified there as the individual who compiled the collection of *Udāna-varga* (*Wūtuōnā sòng* 鄔南

Please note that Sēngyòu's catalogue in both the SAT<sup>38</sup> and CBETA<sup>39</sup> digital versions of the Taishō edition includes a typo in the title beginning with *Yǔjiā* 庾伽, which is written *Gēngjiā* 庚伽 instead, although there is a footnote in the printed edition saying that it was corrected in the Ming edition: 庚=庚<明>.<sup>40</sup>

## 7. On the Contemplation of the Impure

Let us now discuss the peculiar practice known as the contemplation of the impure. It is necessary to gain an idea of its place in the overall structure of the MS, which includes seventeen sections in two fascicles. The first eight deal with the mastery of breath counting meditation, aka mindfulness with breathing (*ānāpānā niān* 安那般那念; Skt *ānāpāna-smṛti*). The next four sections constitute the part focusing on the contemplation of the impure (*bújìng guān* 不淨觀; Skt *aśubha-bhāvanā*). The remaining five sections deal with various other practices pertaining to the Sarvāstivāda curriculum, which I will simply mention without elaborating on them:

1. Cultivation of contemplating the *constituents* (*dhātu*) (*Xiūxíng guānjiè dì shísān* 修行觀界第十三);
2. Cultivation of the *samādhi* of the *four immeasurables* (*apramāṇa*) (*Xiūxíng sìwúliàng sānmèi dì shísi* 修行四無量三昧第十四);<sup>41</sup>
3. Cultivation of contemplating the *aggregates* (*skandha*) (*Xiūxíng guānyīn dì shíwǔ* 修行觀陰第十五);
4. Cultivation of contemplating the *sense-data* (*āyatana*) (*Xiūxíng guānrù dì shíliù* 修行觀入第十六);
5. Cultivation of contemplating the *twelve links of dependent origination* (*pratītya-samutpāda*) (*Xiūxíng guān shí'èr yīnyuán dì shíqī* 修行觀十二因緣第十七).

This sequence indicates how practitioners were expected to follow a specific progression in their meditative endeavor under the direction of a qualified teacher. Although this progression is not necessarily linear, each step includes a memorandum explaining the type of practice on which students had to focus on before moving to the next stage. Yet, these succinct notes suggest that direct instructions received from the teacher proved central. Although these notes constitute the only indications remaining at our disposal, they do provide helpful hints about the major milestones on this path, particularly in describing specific “signs” or “marks” indicating success once each central practice has been mastered.

### 7.1. How Does One Meditate on Impurity?

This begs the question of how, concretely, practitioners who followed this manual were supposed to deal with the meditation on impurity. Did they go to cremation grounds, as described in Theravāda literature?

It appears that they were rather encouraged to use their imagination and their intelligence to uproot attachment to the body and to their mistaken views. Contemplation was done externally—by imagining the decaying body—and then internally, by entering increasingly deep levels of *samādhi*, sanctioned by various “marks” indicating their progress. Here follows the outline of how this type of meditation progressed in four stages, corresponding to the MS sections 9 to 12.

(頌). T 29 no. 1558, b27. Ejima (1989). *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya of Vasubandhu*. Bibliotheca Indica et Buddhologica 1. Tokyo: Sankibo Press, 3.

<sup>38</sup> SAT stands for Saṃgaṇikikṛtam Taiśotripiṭakam, indicating the Database of the Buddhist Canon compiled during the Taishō era.

<sup>39</sup> CBETA stands for Chinese Buddhist Electronic Text Association, which has also digitized the Buddhist Canon compiled during the Taishō era.

<sup>40</sup> [http://tripitaka.cbeta.org/T55n2145\\_002](http://tripitaka.cbeta.org/T55n2145_002) (accessed Tuesday, 14 May 2019).

<sup>41</sup> This section was studied and translated in Mohr (2015).

## 7.2. Stage A

The four stages A, B, C, and D (divisions created for the sake of clarity) also apply to mindfulness with breathing. Here is how this fourfold progression begins: Cultivation of the Preliminary Path of Effort<sup>42</sup>, On the Contemplation of the Impure, **Falling Back**, Ninth Section (*Xiūxíng fāngbiàndào bújīngguān tuīfēn dì-jiǔ* 修行方便道 不淨觀 退分第九).

The Chinese text sometimes carries nuances that differ from reconstructed Sanskrit equivalents, and there is an ongoing discussion about whether to privilege the Chinese text or the reconstructed Sanskrit. Although I recognize the importance of identifying technical terms and concepts that were elaborated in Sanskrit, in the case of texts for which no Sanskrit original have been preserved, I favor prioritizing the reception of the text. In other words, contemporary readers of classical Chinese did not necessarily have the scholarly expertise to imagine what may have been the original phrasing in Buddhahadra's mind or in the Indic text he possibly brought with him.

This also begs the question of which vernacular language these authors were using. If Buddhahadra was born in the region of Kapilavastu, tentatively identified with the Greater Lumbini Area in present-day Nepal,<sup>43</sup> and then studied in Jībīn 罽賓,<sup>44</sup> his mother tongue was probably some variant of Prakrit, or even a regional Newari dialect. How he communicated with his peers in China remains unclear, but he must have been helped by Zhìyán 智嚴 (active c. 4–5 century CE), who in the first place had invited Buddhahadra to follow him to “propagate the Dharma in the Middle Land (China)”.<sup>45</sup>

In any case, what strikes us is that each of these four sections begins in a very personal way, which conveys the impression that the teacher is directly speaking to his students without any attempt to put this into the mouth of the Buddha. There is not a single “thus have I heard” statement in the whole text, which indicates that its author did not claim to write a “sutra” in the first place. In the contrary, the author writes, “I have explained . . . .” in addressing his students.

As seen below, this Chinese text is composed mostly of short clauses of five characters. I chose not to mirror this syntax in the English translation, and rather to privilege readability by writing plain sentences in prose. Here is an excerpt of how section 9 begins:

So far, I explained the breath counting meditation (*ānānniàn* 安般念) within [the limits of] my ability (*wǒ lì suǒnéng* 我力所能). [To] practice the contemplation of the impure, [let us] successively analyze (*fēnbié* 分別) the preliminary path of effort [focusing on] the contemplation of the impure, [and how] the mental focus (*sīwéiniàn* 思惟念) falls back (*tuījiǎn* 退減). Gaining insight (*míngzhì* 明智) into the marks to be known (*suǒzhī xiàng* 所知相) is what I am about to explain.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>42</sup> In some early translations and in this particular text (the MS), the term *fāngbiàndào* 方便道 is used as the Chinese equivalent for the Sanskrit *prayogamārga*, or path of preparatory application, according to the perspective articulated in the Sautrāntika interpretation of Sarvāstivāda. Similarly, *fāngbiàn* 方便 (preliminary) was used as an equivalent for the Sanskrit *prayoga*, and does not constitute the Chinese translation for “skillful means” (*upāya*), a later innovation. See Willemen (2013, p. 44).

<sup>43</sup> While competing claims about the accurate location of Kapilavastu are still raging, archeological excavations are ongoing in the walled city of Tilaurakot in Nepal, whereas the nearby Indian town of Piprahawa also has argued that it corresponds to this ancient city. The present national boundaries and these sites' competition in an effort to grab pilgrims' attention tend to conceal the fact that both locations, in fact, may have been part of larger settlement. For the current excavations in Tilaurakot, see <https://en.unesco.org/news/new-season-archaeological-investigations-commences-tilaurakot-kapilavastu>, a report about the work produced in conjunction with Durham University (accessed Thursday, 21 May 2020). Regarding this region, now increasingly considered as the Greater Lumbini Area, see Coningham et al. (2018).

<sup>44</sup> This Chinese term seems to have included Uḍḍiyāna, Gandhāra, and Bactria. See Willemen (2012, p. 483). In this article, Willemen rather argues for Buddhahadra's Bactrian origin, much farther West than present-day Nepal or even Pakistan. He describes him as “a Sautrāntika whose Buddhism has a Bactrian origin” (Willemen 2013, p. 35). An inscription by a monk with the same name is discussed in Singh (2012).

<sup>45</sup> *Gāosēng zhuàn* 高僧傳 (Biographies of Eminent Monks, T 50 no. 2059, 339b07–08).

<sup>46</sup> T 15 no. 618, 314b18–b21. The usage of the first person in this paragraph seems to suggest that these teachings were first delivered as oral instructions.



This section examines examples of mistakes or challenges in this practice's initial phase which lead practitioners to "give up" or to regress instead of progressing. Yet, in his first words the author also points out that he intends to explain the "marks" (or signs) that those involved in this approach should be able to recognize. These constitute signposts in the experiential journey.

### 7.3. Stage B

The contemplation of the impure's second stage, identified here as "Stage B," corresponds to a phase during which practitioners get attached to this form of meditation or stagnate without being able to move forward. It is called "Cultivation of the Preliminary [Path]—On the Contemplation of the Impure, *Lingering*, Tenth section" (*Xiūxíng fāngbiàn bújìngguān zhùfēn dì-shí* 修行方便不淨觀住分第十). This section focused on lingering is the shortest among the four sections dedicated to the contemplation of the impure,<sup>47</sup> and seems meant as a preparation for the following stage, which describes the first results yielded by the practitioner's efforts. Examining this chapter nevertheless allows us to appreciate the extent to which it emphasizes the experiential dimension, including bodily components that are reminiscent of yoga practice. The last part provides the clearest example:

[As] the ideation of the bones (*gǔxiǎng* 骨想) gains a solid appearance (*jiān xiàng* 堅相), its quality [becomes] compact and seamless. [Yet if practitioners] do not proceed in sequence and practice the [other] various perceptions (*zhòng xiǎng* 衆想) [of impurity], abstain from seeking to progress forward, or [if their] mind does not turn away [from the objects of loathing], [they will] be unable to [acquire] mastery (*juéding* 決定) [in this practice] either. Although [practitioners may] have completed [this form of] cultivation, [in that case] the wonderful path of impurity cannot produce advanced ideations (*shèng xiǎng* 勝想), [which would] make their bodies limber (*róuruǎn* 柔軟).<sup>48</sup> Without a limber body (*róuruǎn shēn* 柔軟身), awareness of the outflows (*liú jué* 流覺)<sup>49</sup> does not arise. The inability to generate awareness of the outflows constitutes what is called lingering in cultivation (*xiūxíng zhù* 修行住). (T 15 no. 618, 315b15–315b21)

Becoming aware of the "outflows" suggests the ability to reflect on areas where delusion and defilements (or afflictions, if we privilege the nuance in Chinese) prevent practitioners from gaining freedom from the automated behaviors producing bondage. Here is how it unfolds in the next section.

### 7.4. Stage C

Cultivation of the Preliminary Path of Effort—On the Contemplation of the Impure, *Progress*, Eleventh Section (*Xiūxíng fāngbiàndào bújìngguān shēngjìnfēn dì shíyī* 修行方便道不淨觀升進分第十一). It is toward the end of this section 11 that Ven. Dhammajoti identified a turning point that is crucial for our discussion. Although the gist of his findings in this regard have already been published, it is worthwhile to have another look at this passage, which suggests ways for us to determine where Buddhahadbra was trying to lead his readers. Instead of quoting the existing translation,<sup>50</sup> let me

<sup>47</sup> This is also the case for the third section "Cultivation of the Preliminary Path—Mindfulness with Breathing, on Lingering, Third Section" (*Xiūxíng fāngbiàndào ānpán niàn zhùfēn dì-sān* 修行方便道安般念住分第三), which is also the shortest among the eight sections dedicated to mindfulness with breathing.

<sup>48</sup> Some sources consider this flexibility as one of the Buddha's qualities. See "His mind was soft and peaceful, his body limber" (*qí xīn hēn qí shēn róuruǎn* 其心和安其身柔軟) in *Púyào jīng* 普曜經 (*Lalitavistara*), T 3 no. 186, 526b10. A similar description appears in the SCSM, T 15 no. 614, 272a21. It enumerates three signs indicating that meditation on the impure was successful, the first one being: "The body becomes comfortable, soft, and light" (*shēntǐ héyuè róuruǎn qīngbiàn* 身體和悅柔軟輕便). Yamabe and Sueki (2009), p. 13.

<sup>49</sup> The origins of this compound are unclear, but it seems to refer to the presence or absence of outflows or contaminations (*Sk āsrava*; Ch. *liú* 流; later translated as *lòu* 漏), which is a major theme in the Sarvāstivāda approach to practice. See Dhammajoti (2015, pp. 48–49).

<sup>50</sup> Dhammajoti (2009, p. 279).



retranslate this passage in a style that is consistent with the previous paragraph and privileges the Chinese syntax, since there is no Sanskrit original we could refer to:

In connection with the body (*yú shēn* 於身),<sup>51</sup> [one] produces (*qǐ* 起) the ideation of purity (*jìng xiǎng* 淨想), and the contemplation of the impure [serves as] the antidote (*duìzhì* 對治).<sup>52</sup> Without striving toward [it] (*bùqiú* 不求), [this practice] brings to a halt (*zhǐ* 止) the longing of desire (*tānyù* 貪欲), [through] reflection (*sīwéi* 思惟) and training (*xí* 習) in disillusionment (*yànhuàn* 厭患). In addition, there is the antidote of purity (*duìzhì* 淨對治), [practiced] without carrying out (*búzuò* 不作) the ideation of disillusionment (*yànhuàn xiǎng* 厭患想).

This passage establishes a distinction between the contemplation of the impure considered as an antidote, which uses disillusionment (also translated as “disgust”), and the next stage where purity becomes the focus, which does not use disillusionment (or “disgust”) anymore. As explained later, this transition corresponds to the shift between the second and the third liberation. The text then moves into more colorful descriptions:

[These constitute] the preliminary (*fāngbiàn* 方便) [methods] for pure liberation (*jìng jiětuō* 淨解脫),<sup>53</sup> [allowing] intelligent individuals (*zhìzhě* 智者) to open the eye of insight (*huìyǎn* 慧眼). Namely, as [practitioners are] connected (*yuán* 緣) to the impure, white bones (*báigǔ* 白骨) radiate an outflow of light (*liúguāng chū* 流光出).<sup>54</sup> From there emerge in succession trees of bluish-green color (*qīngsè* 青色) [adorned] with marvelous jewels (*miàobǎo* 妙寶), in yellow, red, or in immaculate white (*xiānbái* 鮮白). [Their] branches and leaves, [and their] flowers (*zhī yè huā* 枝葉花) are also similarly covered (*shàngfú* 上服) with pearl and jade necklaces (*zhū yīngguà* 珠瓔珞) of various fine and marvelous colors (*wéimào sè* 微妙色). This constitutes what is called cultivation [having reached] the mark (*xiàng* 相) of pure liberation (*jìng jiě* 淨解)<sup>55</sup> [through the] preliminary (*fāngbiàn* 方便) [methods].

Here and there adornments (*zhuāngyán* 莊嚴) appear on that impure body and, after [a progression in] incremental stages (*jiējí* 階級), *samādhi* sets alight (*rán* 然) the lamp of insight (*huìdēng* 慧燈). [It] radiates (*chū* 出) from that single body (*bǐ yīshēn* 彼一身), [and spreads] high and wide (*gāoguǎng* 高廣), reaching everywhere (*pǔ zhōubiàn* 普周遍). All the remaining bodies (*yīqiè yúshēn* 一切餘身)<sup>56</sup> produce similar adornments. This constitutes the pure liberation (*jìng jiětuō* 淨解脫) [accomplished through] the preliminary (*fāngbiàn* 方便) contemplation of the impure.<sup>57</sup>

In case anyone had doubts about whether practitioners from the Sarvāstivāda school were only involved in the study of dry Abhidharma theory, this effusive passage should contribute to dispel them. Now, the central question that should be addressed is whether this “pure liberation” marks the culmination of the meditation on the impure, or whether this practice leads to further stages and visions. This question gains from being cross-examined with similar or earlier Buddhist sources, such as the section of the *Saddharmasmṛtyupasthānasūtra* (*Zhèngfǎ niànchù jīng* 正法念處經, T 17 no. 721) discussed by Kritzer (2020) in this issue of the journal *Religion*. In contrast to the MS, this scripture

<sup>51</sup> The passage immediately preceding this sentence mentions that the “body” mentioned here is a corpse (*sǐshī xíng* 死屍形).

<sup>52</sup> Compare with the previous translation of this passage (316b27–316c11) by Dhammajoti (2009, p. 279).

<sup>53</sup> One of the eight forms of liberation (*bā jiětuō* 八解脫).

<sup>54</sup> A similar description appears in the SCSM, T 15 no. 614, 272a21. It enumerates three signs indicating that meditation on the impure was successful, the second one being: “white bones emit rays of light like white jade” (*báigǔ liúguāng yóurú báiāi* 白骨流光猶如白珂). Yamabe and Sueki (2009, p. 13).

<sup>55</sup> The compound *jìng jiě* 淨解 (pure liberation) is rarely used, and we need to assume that it serves here as an abbreviation for the more common *jìng jiětuō* 淨解脫, meaning the same. One exception is the name of the bodhisattva Śuddhādhimukti, which two Chinese translators rendered as Jìngjiě Púsà 淨解菩薩, T. 14 no. 474, 531a22 and T. 14 no. 475, 551a1.

<sup>56</sup> This seems to indicate a type of meditation where one dead body is the object of contemplation, and then morphs into multiple bodies. This form of “multiplication” is common in the visualization of deities, for instance in Tibetan Buddhism.

<sup>57</sup> The excerpt from the MS translated here corresponds to T 15 no. 618, 316b27–316c11.

rather encourages a dispassionate contemplation of the body from the head to the feet. Thus, we see at least three tendencies within the literature emphasizing the contemplation of the impure: those meant to inspire repulsion, those meant to encourage an intellectual understanding of the physical body, and those such as the MS that combine the two with the addition of blissful visions.

## 8. A Capstone Event

Admittedly, the title of this article and of this particular section are ambiguous, in the sense that once a summit has been reached, there is often a taller mountain behind. In other words, the ascension process involved in meditation does not necessarily culminate in a conclusion and can be envisioned as a lifelong task, not to mention the fact that descent is equally crucial. Furthermore, meditation on the impure does not coincide with the closure of this manual, since there are still five additional sections aimed at fine-tuning what has been mastered in this segment.

### Stage D

As mentioned, there is still one section dealing with this type of meditation on the impure. It is titled “Cultivation of the Preliminary Path of Effort—On [the Contemplation of] the Impure, *Mastery*, Twelfth section” (*Xiūxíng fāngbiàndào bújìng juédingfēn dì shíèr* 修行方便道不淨決定分第十二). After having attempted to translate *juéding* 決定 as “decisive,” I opted for “mastery,” which is not literal at all but has the benefit of indicating a non-reversible stage at the end of this fourfold progression. Here is an excerpt of how it unfolds here:

The white bones [of a skeleton] (*báigǔ* 白骨) having decayed (*xiǔ* 朽) for a long time (*jiǔgù* 久故) show (*xiàn* 現) the marks (*xiàng* 相) of being scattered, rotten, and falling apart (*shū jí léi* 疎瘠羸).<sup>58</sup> [They] break into small pieces (*pòsuì* 破碎) as if they were fine dust (*chénméi* 塵塵). Everything without exception gets wiped out (*mómiè* 磨滅) from that point (*cóngxià* 從下), [and it] arises (*qǐ* 起) in succession (*cìdì* 次第). [Using] preliminary efforts (*fāngbiàn* 方便) [practitioners] destroy (*huài* 壞) the foundations (*suǒyī* 所依) [of wrong views]: This [constitutes] what is meant by pure insight (*jìngguāi* 淨慧), the sign of mastery (*juéding xiàng* 決定相) in [their] practice.<sup>59</sup>

What does this mark or this sign represent, then? This is where it gets really fascinating, as metaphors get deployed in abundance. Although my translation remains rough, it should give an idea of what happens at this stage:

All (*yíqiè* 一切) [such] immeasurable (*wúliàng* 無量) and profound (*shēnmào* 深妙) types (*zhǒng* 種) [of signs] reach everywhere (*pǔ zhōubiàn* 普周遍). The emergence (*shēng* 生) of mastery’s true form (*juéding zhēnshí* 決定真實) resembles a golden-winged garuḍa (*jīnchìniǎo* 金翅鳥). Next arises a pure land (*qīngjìngdì* 清淨地), level (*píngtǎn* 平坦) and magnificently adorned (*jí zhuāngyán* 極莊嚴).<sup>60</sup>

It is worth mentioning that the realm called here “pure land” is often associated with the fourth *dhyāna*. In that case, it is called “the pure land where thinking has been abandoned” (*shěnniàn qīngjìngdì* 捨念清淨地; Skt *upekṣā-smṛti pariśuddha-bhūmi*). It does not refer to the specific Pure Land of the Buddha Amitābha, however. Here is the last part of this description, which adds a touch of visual imagery:

<sup>58</sup> This is another example of a rare combination of characters found nowhere else, but here each one seems to convey a separate meaning. The character *shū* 疎 often stands for *shū* 疏, meaning “scattered.” The character *jí* 瘠 seems to stand for *zì* 齧, which indicates rotten meat or the bones of dead animals. The character *léi* 羸 can refer to something that gets deteriorated or goes bad, hence “falling apart” for bones.

<sup>59</sup> T 15 no. 618, 317b04–b07.

<sup>60</sup> T 15 no. 618, 317b08–b10.

Courageous (*yǒngměng* 勇猛) and jewel [wearing] lions (*bǎo shīzǐ* 寶師子), kings of bulls (*niúwáng* 牛王) resembling dragon elephants (*lóngxiàng* 龍象), all such extraordinary (*wèicéng* 未曾)<sup>61</sup> species (*lèi* 類), here and there (*chùchù* 處處) [manifest] the mark of mastery (*juéding xiàng* 決定相).<sup>62</sup>

One of the issues raised by these passages is whether such descriptions are prescriptive, meaning that students are expected to see these extraordinary landscapes in their mind, or whether this is simply a literary touch, maybe reflecting what Buddhābhadda himself (or his teacher) saw during meditation. Although we could consider these descriptions as merely examples of what could be perceived during this process, with considerable leeway for individual variations, prior Indic sources do indicate similar patterns indicating the progression from the impure to the pure.

Early teachings revolving around the eight liberations or eight deliverances (*bā jiětuō* 八解脫; Pāli *aṭṭha vimokkha*, Skt *aṣṭā-vimokṣa*) already emphasize the shift that occurs between the second and third liberation. Whereas the first two liberations focus on realizing impurity,<sup>63</sup> the third liberation brings about a change of perspective. Bhikkhu Analāyo clarifies the sequence of these eight liberations across both Pāli and Sanskrit sources, and refers to the *Mahāvibhāṣā*, which “explains that, once the perception of unattractiveness, *asubha-saññā*, has been developed in this way, to counterbalance excessive disgust and negativity the third *vimokkha* comes into its place, which develops the perception of what is beautiful, *subha*”.<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, what is noteworthy is that this new focus arising in the third liberation coincides with the “development of the four *brahmavihāras* as a liberation of the mind in the form of a boundless radiation”.<sup>65</sup>

Unsurprisingly, the four immeasurables (*sì wúliàng* 四無量)—known in the Pāli tradition as the *brahmavihāras* (Brahma abodes)—constitute section 14 of the MS, which follows the discussion on the impure.<sup>66</sup> Thus, we see a clear line of progression from the impure to the pure, which is then tied to the light and purity associated with loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. They, in turn, relate to the four meditative concentrations (*dhyāna*). Such intertwined links are made explicit in the Pāli Canon and pervade Mahāyāna sources as well, providing yet another indication of their frequent convergence.

## 9. From Purity to Pure Land

This prompts us to discuss what appears to be taking place in the MS in relation to the contemplation of the impure, how it leads to purity, and from there how it produces the vision of a pure land.

As indicated in the aforementioned first liberation, contemplating impurity first aims to trigger the awareness that attachment to oneself has to be forsaken. Such awareness results from a deep realization that the practitioner’s physical envelope gets produced from a combination of repulsive substances, not from a mere intellectual understanding. This awareness is then reinforced by a constant emphasis on the causes and conditions that begin with conception and lead to being born from two parents. Here is one example of how this perspective is presented in the MS:

<sup>61</sup> Used in the sense of the Sanskrit *apūrva*, literally indicating something unprecedented.

<sup>62</sup> T 15 no. 618, 317b11–b12.

<sup>63</sup> The first one is directed inward, with the perception of one’s own impurity, and the second one expands this realization to other beings’ physical forms for the purpose of eradicating attachment.

<sup>64</sup> Analāyo (2009, p. 612). His quote from Xuanzang’s Chinese translation of the *Mahāvibhāṣā* (Āpīdámó dà pípóshā lùn 阿毘達磨大毘婆沙論; Treatise of the Great Commentary on the Abhidharma, T 27 no. 1545, 437c28) clearly marks the transition from the first two liberations focused on the impure to the third one, developing the perception of what is pure or beautiful. See also (Kritzer 2017).

<sup>65</sup> Analāyo (2009, pp. 612–13).

<sup>66</sup> For a translation, see Mohr (2015).

Initially born from [bodily] impurities (*bújìng* 不淨), [sentient beings] also grow up (*zhǎng* 長) from impurities. At the beginning [shortly after conception] the embryo (*jiālúoluó* 迦羅邏)<sup>67</sup> dwells (*zhù* 住) within impurities (*bújìng zhōng* 不淨中).<sup>68</sup>

Imagining one's *kalala* phase during the first week after conception constitutes a leitmotif in this text, repeated no less than 16 times. In any case, this description is meant to serve as a wakeup call depicting the stunning reality of how everyone came into existence.

### 9.1. Impurity Morphs into Purity

Now, the most intriguing part of this meditation practice, at least at first sight, is the transformation that Buddhahadra describes, whereby disgust about the body's impure constituents transforms into a positive perception of light and radiance. This is often described as "light emanating from the white bones":

At the same time, both traditions agree in stating that the *aśubhā* itself (even without the counteraction of the *śubhā* meditation), at its final stage of accomplishment, actually results in a positive state of ease, joy and calm. [...] Light is visualized to emanate from the white bones, pervading everywhere, and with it is the manifestation of a host of signs of beauty, purity and adornment. (Dhammajoti 2009, p. 287.)

As we try to widen this conversation, one avenue would be to describe this phenomenon as a *catharsis* (in Greek, *katharsis* means "purification" or "cleansing"), which has the effect of transforming emotions. Obviously, the problem in using this terminology is that the main concern of practitioners involved in the contemplation promoted by Buddhahadra was not so much dealing with emotions but how to get closer to liberation. What could be said, however, is that a transformative realization that leads to abandoning previous misconceptions may also involve some sort of shock, which results in letting go of false views or attachments, with consequences affecting the whole psyche, including emotions.

### 9.2. Purity Manifesting as a Pure Land

To recap, the contemplation of the impure described in the MS seems to involve a sort of chain reaction. It begins by visualizing impure or unpleasant scenes, including one's own body and decaying corpses. Then, the completion of this practice is marked by a perception of light and purity, which concludes this meditation. The third phase coincides with a transformation from the perception of light and purity to visions which, for some practitioners, evoked a "pure land".

Although no compelling evidence indicates that this particular form of contemplation of the impure is directly linked to devotional practices focused on the Buddha Amitābha and his Pure Land, similarities between the two practices cannot be overlooked. The growing popularity of practices focused on the Buddha Amitābha partially resulted from the work of the Yogācāra teacher Asaṅga (Wúzhào 無著; c. 315–390), who preceded the MS.<sup>69</sup> Furthermore, in 402 Lushan Huiyuan—mentioned above as the author of the MS's preface—established the White Lotus Society (Báilián shè 白蓮社), a group of fellow individuals whose shared purpose was to seek rebirth in the Western Land of Bliss (Sukhāvatī). In spite of their completely different backgrounds, these two practices (the contemplation of the impure and the visualization of the Buddha Amitābha) share some similarities in their depiction

<sup>67</sup> One of the transcriptions for *kalala*, the first stage after conception, often transcribed as *jiēluólán* 羯羅藍. This term is used no less than 16 times in the MS, with the transcription *jiālúoluó* 迦羅邏. See (Kritzer 2009). The *Garbhāvākraṇṭisūtra*, also translated by Kritzer (2014), provides an elaborate description. See T 24 no. 1451, 253b28–c9. Yet, this is included in the *Gēběn shuō yīqiè yǒubù pínàiyé zāshì* 根本說一切有部毘奈耶雜事 (T 24 no. 1451), translated by Yijing 義淨 around 710, and cannot have served as a source for the MS. It is more likely that Buddhahadra relied on the *Zá āhán jīng* 雜阿含經, T 02 no. 0099, 357c29, whose translation is attributed to Guṇabhadra (394–468).

<sup>68</sup> T 15 no. 618, 317b13–b14.

<sup>69</sup> See Bayer (2015).

of wonderful blissful lands offering optimal spiritual environments remote from the human condition's constraints and unpleasant features.

If we look back at how the MS describes manifestations of beauty and purity, followed by the vision of “a pure land (*qīngjìngdì* 清淨地), level and magnificently adorned,”<sup>70</sup> this description evokes both the *Avataṃsaka-sūtra* (*Huáyán jīng* 華嚴經; Flower Garland Sutra)—whose first translation into Chinese is attributed to Buddhahadra—and the Sukhāvatī Pure Land (*qīngjìng guótǔ* 清淨國土). The suggestion that Buddhahadra was involved in the translation of the *Sutra of Immeasurable Life* (*Wúliángshòu jīng* 無量壽經, aka *Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha*)<sup>71</sup>—which later became one of the three major scriptures in the Pure Land belief system—further indicates possible intertwinements between discrete understandings of what a “pure land” entails. In spite of the predominant literal interpretations of the Western Pure Land as a physical location, there is also a significant body of literature considering it as a metaphor for mental states.<sup>72</sup> Thus, although we should abstain from reading too much into the visions marking the contemplation of the impure's completion according to the MS, which certainly do not directly evoke the Sukhāvatī Pure Land, parallels deserve to be mentioned.

When we examine these processes across a broader sample of meditation practices, it involves looking at how various “ideations” (*xiǎng* 想) produce corresponding “marks” (*xiàng* 相). We know that the two terms were later conflated in Song China and in Japan,<sup>73</sup> but more work is necessary to clarify the correlation between *saṃjñā* (ideation or perception) and *lakṣaṇa* (or *ākāra*; sign, characteristic, attribute, or mark) in Indic sources.<sup>74</sup> This should help us understand how the transition from one to another was understood across various traditions. For now, I suggest expanding our reflection by discussing some broader implications of the meditation on the impure as described in the MS.

## 10. Possible Ethical Implications

At first sight, meditation on the impure aims at freeing the mind from its unwholesome tendencies through a process of gradual purification, with the occasional addition of a sort of “shock therapy”. Yet, the MS describes how this process culminates in a sign marked by beauty and purity. This appears to result from its emphasis on removing defilements, assuming that this process will allow practitioners to get closer to liberation. Albeit both are not necessarily mutually exclusive, an alternative way to envision this process, which became prevalent with the increasing popularity of the Tathāgatagarbha theory, is to consider that “purification” in this context suggests the return to the original purity of one's intrinsic nature. This latter form of interpretation takes for granted that the Buddha-nature is not to be acquired or attained but rather uncovered, as taught in the above-mentioned *Sutra of the Tathāgata's Womb*.

In short, the contemplative practices described in the MS and other Mahāyāna sources translated into Chinese around the fifth century CE suggest that the Buddhist intertwinement between pure and impure only partially overlaps with Durckheim's observations about a completely different context. The reason for this discrepancy is that a large portion of such Buddhist practices are predicated on

<sup>70</sup> T 15 no. 618, 317b10.

<sup>71</sup> See (Fujita 1990, 1994; Yamabe 1999). Although the role played by Guṇabhadra in this regard also deserves attention, it happened after Buddhahadra. Willemen (2013, pp. 36–37). The Sanskrit text of this sutra has not been preserved.

<sup>72</sup> For a remote testimony, see for instance the *Collection of Debates Heard in Ōhara* (*Ōhara dangi kikigaki shō* 大原談義聞書鈔), a text attributed to Hōnen, saying, “The Land of Bliss is not far: it has only been put at a distance of ten-thousand billions of worlds in the West. Amitābha resides within one's own heart and appears in the form of a Buddha sitting on a lotus pedestal.” *Jōdoshū Zensho* 浄土宗全書 14, 762a. Some scholars claim that it is not the work of Hōnen himself but rather that of his disciple Shōkaku 正覺 (1167–1235).

<sup>73</sup> See Mohr (2009, p. 175), footnote about *kusō* 九想 and *kusō* 九相.

<sup>74</sup> One dimension of this shift seems to have resulted from the propensity of Kumārajīva and his translation team to use *xiàng* 相 instead of *xiǎng* 想. This is particularly visible when comparing the translations of the *Diamond Sutra* (Sk *Vajracchedikā Sūtra*) into Chinese attributed to Kumārajīva and to Xuanzang. In manuscript texts, the choice to privilege *xiàng* 相 is also often the result of the copyist's preference for a Chinese character with fewer strokes.



the idea that purity (understood as an attribute of the Buddha-nature) can be visualized, actualized, or uncovered but cannot be acquired, because it is considered as intrinsic or inborn.

The Chinese translations of the *Teachings of Vimalakīrti* point toward this type of understanding by suggesting that the “impure” refers to “limiting factors,” whereas the “pure” refers to the “inherently free nature” (especially in Xuanzang’s translation). The important point in this perspective is that the correspondence between both (pure versus impure) is asymmetric, in the sense that purity is a given (the Buddha-nature being considered as the real nature of all sentient beings), whereas impurity refers to peripheral (although often existentially heavy) self-created obstacles, which can be dispelled like clouds obscuring the moon. This constitutes one of the keys for understanding “nonduality,” which in this case is not predicated on the existence of an immortal soul but rather postulates the presence of a pervading seed of perfection (the womb or embryo of Buddhahood, *tathāgatagarbha*) in all sentient beings, which can become manifest anytime, especially after following the appropriate practices. Although this approach may appear radically different from the gradual path of purification followed by the Sarvāstivādins, teachers such as Buddhahadra were at least familiar with both understandings of the path, and may have embraced these differences (between the *tathāgatagarbha* understanding and the Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma).

In this regard, overcoming the pure versus impure dichotomy results from discoveries and awarenesses reached through experiential approaches, such as meditation or other mental tools, leading to an unmediated direct perception (*pratyakṣa*). The text discussed in this article, in spite of its occasional archaic language, contains a surprising passage pointing out a commonality shared by all individuals, regardless of their origins. It transpires in the words of Lushan Huiyuan, who made the following statement in his preface to the MS:

Hence, different ethnicities (*yìzú* 異族) [share] the same breath (*tóngqì* 同氣), [although] illusory forms (*huàn xíng* 幻形) produce distance (*gào shū* 告疎).<sup>75</sup>

This quote indicates the extent to which fifth-century China, at least in some geographical areas, saw a vast array of diverse ethnic backgrounds, with merchants, pilgrims, and monks contributing to the awareness of a plurality, perceived by Huiyuan as the display of illusory forms or appearances.

The aforementioned point about “sharing the same breath” suggests elements for reflections that could prove relevant for us in the twenty-first century. Although this goes beyond the present article’s purview, let me mention that recognizing our own mortality and our essential nature can translate into ethical action transcending the gap between particular locations, historical periods, or languages. The gist of this idea is that contemplating death (the contemplation of the impure can be considered as a subspecies of this larger genus)—or at least the recognition of its inevitability—serves to bracket the plurality of belief systems, including agnosticism. This awareness can function as the foundation for recognizing the common ground of the human condition and to engage in the deconstruction of false identities. In a sense, developing an awareness of one’s mortality can become a subversive enterprise, for it functions as a powerful antidote to prejudice deriving from differences in wealth or in national, racial, or sexual identities. In short, death serves as the ultimate equalizer, and the contemplation of impurity functions as a cleaning device to remove the artificial labels attached to the skeleton while it is still momentarily surrounded by flesh. Thus, clearly facing the empirical fact of our own finitude can help abolish the sense of distinctions or differentiations. Although Mary Douglas probably did not mean it in this sense, this echoes the sentence that we saw earlier: “Where there is no differentiation there is no defilement”. That said, she also adds the following comment: “In this final stage of total disintegration, dirt is utterly undifferentiated” (Douglas 2001, p. 161).

Although this phase closes the cycle leading away from impurity, and even though Douglas appears to have intuitively approached an understanding within reach of what Buddhist sources such

<sup>75</sup> T 15 no. 618, 301b05. The Taishō edition uses a variant that reads “create [such] traces/impressions (*zào jì* 造跡)” instead of “produce distance” (*gào shū* 告疎 = 疏).



as the MS explain, she does not articulate the reasons why the impure can be embedded within the pure. This is where texts such as the MS—which sets forth a rationale explaining how contemplating the impure leads to the direct perception of purity and light—could contribute to Western theories on purity/impurity. Whether this ancient type of understanding can then be “reverse-engineered” and applied to non-Asian contexts remain to be tested.

The above remarks began by examining an utterance made by Lushan Huiyuan in the hope to allow readers to get a glimpse of the surprising multicultural awareness of its author. Expanding our reflection on the Buddhist contemplation of the impure, which is inseparable from meditation on death, likewise aims to distinguish the elements of the MS that are tied to a specific socio-historical context from those that still resonate today as meaningful. Although the universality of death can serve as an anchor for these conversations, pointing in this direction does not constitute in itself an attempt to articulate a sophisticated ethical theory, nor do these considerations purport to identify universalistic tendencies within the MS.

## 11. Concluding Remarks

The *Meditation Sutra* compiled by Buddhahadra epitomizes the emergence of a new era in Chinese Buddhism, where meditation was occupying an increasingly central position. This text likely served as a memorandum for the teacher’s direct instructions, suggesting the existence of monastic communities where practices such as the contemplation of the impure were systematically explored. Admittedly, the MS does not posit a once and for all capstone event, because practitioners are rather led on a systematic journey toward the eradication of afflictions (or defilements, if we privilege the nuances of *kleśā*) and their deep causes. Yet, it depicts watershed moments on the path, such as the “the mark of pure liberation”. The advent of such “pure liberation” also produces the manifestation of adornments, and finally results in the vision of a type of pure land (albeit not identical with the Western Land of Bliss or *Sukhāvatī*). Such a paradox of the impure leading to the purest vision constitutes the gist of what this article purports to investigate, without necessarily providing all the answers to the questions it raises.

While emphasizing the specificity of the MS, it also proves necessary to appreciate its contribution within a much broader string of textual and monastic traditions extending from early Buddhist traditions. We briefly examined how similar patterns are visible in Indic sources describing the eight forms of liberation. Further research providing a more comprehensive chronological review of such sources, both in Indic languages and in Chinese, will allow us to gain a better understanding of what belongs to areas of continuity as opposed to areas of innovation. Regarding the innovative dimension of the MS, the third phase of the contemplation of the impure involving visions of a type of pure land deserve special attention, for they suggest experiential practices reaching beyond the boundaries of scholastic Abhidharma.

As we explore the scope of Buddhahadra’s activities, it is worth noting that he also produced a translation of the *Chūshēng wúliàngmén chí jīng* 出生無量門持經 (Sustainer of the Birth of the Immeasurable Gate, T 19 no. 1012), the second Chinese version of the *Anantamukha-dhāraṇī*, which indicates an early interest in esoteric practices. In China, Amoghavajra (Bùkōng Jīngāng 不空金剛, 705–774) then rephrased this scripture’s translation to suit his own agendas.

Overall, this article’s usage of the expression “capstone event” was a means to draw our attention to the succession of climaxes marking the completion of each meditation practice. It does not imply that the MS claimed to provide a description of the complete emancipation constituting the ultimate goal of the Buddhist practice, since it rather focuses on the elaborate curriculum leading from one liberation to another. In this regard, it follows the gradual approach articulated in the Sarvāstivāda classics, such as the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*. Important transitions nevertheless coincide with “signs” indicating that one practice was successfully completed, while visions of purity and light mark the apex of the contemplation of the impure, leading to the perception of quasi-mystical landscapes.

This suggests one way in which the Buddhist meditation on impurity depicted in the MS could contribute to complicate Western theories on purity/impurity. Adding to the body of research focusing on how societal norms and the need to preserve the group's balance often provided the background for this dual concept, the experiential or meditative approach could also be taken into account and yield an altogether different perspective. The reason why this approach may prove beneficial is that it provides insight into a heuristic understanding, where "impurity" is either depicted as a temporary misperception of something that morphs into purity as practitioners progress through a sequence of liberations, or as something intrinsically "pure," the latter interpretation becoming increasingly popular once ideas grounded in the Tathāgatagarbha (or embryo of Buddhahood) theory found their way into mainstream Chinese Buddhism. In both cases, "impurity" is considered to exist only in the eye of the beholder, while the meditative curriculum leads practitioners to a direct perception of the light and purity emanating from the most repulsive substances. More concretely, this process often consists of progressing from the initial contemplation of rotting flesh, before perceiving how white bones represent the ultimate reality of transitional physical bodies. At that stage, light emanating from the bones suggests the non-physical nature that survives the disintegration of physical matter (although the idea of a permanent "soul" is foreign to most Buddhist doctrines).

Let me conclude by mentioning the plethora of other aspects of this topic that could and should be further explored. The idea of primordial purity, in particular, has received considerable attention in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. Dzogchen teachers have been eager to link this to "natural awareness" (*rigpa*), often described as nonconceptual wisdom.<sup>76</sup> Envisioning religious traditions and observances through these non-judgmental lenses allows us to embrace some of their common ethical pursuits by looking at their root, an incentive for the promotion of "secularized ethics" advocated by some contemporary Buddhist teachers.

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<sup>76</sup> See, for instance, (Khyentse 2016).

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